
A new ornithological institute in Nigeria

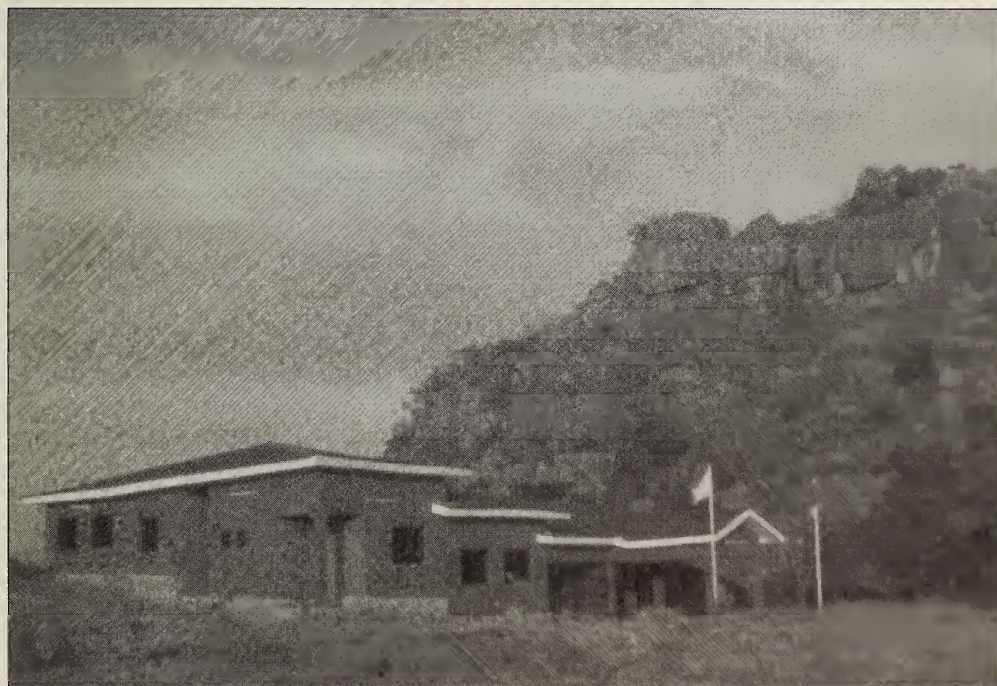
Juliet Vickery and Peter Jones

Nigeria is ornithologically the richest country in West Africa because its immense size encompasses nearly all of Africa's major vegetation zones (from lowland rainforest to Sahelian semi-desert) and, at 883 recorded species, almost half of the continent's avifauna. It is also the most populous country in Africa, supporting 120 million people within its 924,000 km². Almost in the centre of the country the Jos Plateau rises to 800–1,200 m from the surrounding Guinea savanna. Here intensive agriculture, tin mining and accompanying towns and settlements jostle for space among massive granite inselbergs arising from a wide, open landscape.

The Amurum Forest at Laminga, c5 km outside Jos, the administrative capital of Plateau State, is one of the last remnants of natural woodland on the plateau and still has a rich avifauna. Over 160 bird species have been recorded in an area of little more than 100 ha, among which are two highly restricted endemics, Rock Firefinch *Lagonosticta sanguinodorsalis* and its brood parasite Jos Plateau

Indigobird *Vidua maryae*, the former described only in 1998. It could soon be a pivotal area for ornithology in Nigeria and perhaps West Africa as a whole, it being the site of a new research facility, the A P Leventis Ornithological Research Institute. Opened in June 2001 with, as the title suggests, very generous funding by A P Leventis—a name familiar within Nigerian conservation circles—the project involves collaboration between the University of Jos, Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) and nearby Laminga community. The centre is dedicated to the study of birds in particular, biodiversity conservation in general and is the only specialist ornithological institute in West Africa.

The Institute building is almost complete and comprises a lecture room, library (already boasting a collection many European institutions would be proud of, due to the generosity and foresight of its founder), a laboratory and several offices. There is on-site living accommodation for four researchers and separate accommodation for a round-the-clock watchman.



View of the A P Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, Jos Plateau, Nigeria (Peter Jones)



View of the A P Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, Jos Plateau, Nigeria (Peter Jones)

The site is superb: the bottle-green building nestles between two inselbergs, commanding beautiful views over Amurum Forest. Fox Kestrel *Falco alopec* and Lanner Falcon *F. biarmicus* soar above the building and around the tallest granite outcrops, Mocking Cliff-Chat *Myrmecocichla cinnamomeiventris* flits over the rock faces in flashes of chestnut and white, and early in the morning Rock Hyrax *Procapra capensis* bask in the sun. Amurum is not pristine woodland but its future as a study site appears assured as the focus of a NCF community forest project dedicated to its sustainable use by the Laminga community.

The first Head of the Institute is Dr Augustine (Gus) Ezealor, a charismatic and skilled Nigerian ornithologist seconded from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. Gus is already well known to many ABC members for his work on Nigerian IBAs for BirdLife International. Field work at the Institute has already begun with the arrival of the first two postgraduate students, Ross McGregor and Jared Wilson, who are undertaking DPhil projects at Oxford University in collaboration with the University of Jos, and are co-supervised by Will Cresswell (University of Oxford) Peter Jones (University of Edinburgh) and Juliet Vickery (British Trust for Ornithology).

One studentship (Jared Wilson) will focus primarily on Palearctic migrants. More than 25% of all European bird species winter in areas of farmed and grazing lands in the seasonal savannas of West Africa, yet very little is known of their winter habitat requirements or how they interact with Afrotropical residents. However, the habitats on which these species rely are subject to increasing human pressure and perhaps also climate change. For many taxa survival on their wintering grounds plays a major role in their popu-

lation dynamics. The research will aim to collect baseline data on the density and distribution of Palearctic migrants wintering in Sahel and Guinea savanna to determine habitat requirements, and the effects of habitat modification.

The second studentship (Ross Macgregor) will focus on Afrotropical residents. Many tropical forest species are threatened by habitat change and in order to better predict or manage future populations of these species an understanding of their demographics is required. However, few detailed studies of the population dynamics of West African species exist. In addition, though it is known that many species undertake long intra-African migrations, the degree of residency or itinerancy of these to breeding and wintering areas is poorly known. This study aims to obtain baseline data on survival rates and residency patterns of a broad range of Riverine and Guinea savanna forest species.

Obviously, the Institute is more than just a good base for 'outside' students—its main role will be to offer training and education for Nigerians (and students from elsewhere in the continent, particularly West Africa). With this in mind it will run a MSc course in Conservation Biology within the Zoology Department of Jos University, with the first students due to enroll in October 2002.

The potential for the Institute is enormous. It provides a scenic and well-equipped base for a diverse range of research and training activities, and a long-overdue opportunity for a fruitful exchange and sharing of African and European expertise. Nigeria does not have an especially positive image abroad, largely based on that of the big cities such as Lagos and Kano. Reaching Jos is straightforward, with regular and reliable flights from Lagos. The higher altitude has a pleasant climate and Jos is a safe and friendly place, despite recent troubles. Enthusiasm for the Institute, within NCF and the University of Jos, is huge. We hope that ABC members and their colleagues will share this enthusiasm and consider how they might collaborate in a unique initiative.

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